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FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS STAFF

PROGRAM Kaleidoscope STATION WAMU-FM

DATE October 20, 1983 10:00 A.M. CITY Washington, D.C.

SUBJECT Grant Evans/Yellow Rain

DIANE REHM: Sociologist Grant Evans is with me this morning. He'll be talking about yellow rain. And that is not acid rain, by the way, but yellow rain, and whether chemical weapons have actually been used in Southeast Asia....

Good morning, Grant. It's nice to have you here with us.

GRANT EVANS: Good morning, Diane. It's very pleasant to be here....

REHM: How did a sociologist get involved with the whole area of chemical weaponry?

EVANS: Well, I agree it looks very peculiar, because the issue of chemical weapons would have seemed to be, above all, an issue for the physical sciences. Now, the way I got involved was that the American Government has made a series of allegations about the use of chemical weapons in Southeast Asia. Now, the physical scientist -- the extraordinary thing about the allegations is that the physical scientist can't come up with any physical evidence of known chemical weapons.

REHM: Well, they say they can.

EVANS: No, they -- well, they don't, actually. I mean let's clarify that particular issue. Known chemical weapons are nerve gases, mustard gases -- mustard gases were the range of gases used in the First World War -- tear gases, and herbicides. Now, that's what we know to be conventional chemical weapons.

Now, the American Government has said, yes, these are

being used. But they have no physical evidence of any of those conventional chemical weapons. Very peculiar.

It wasn't until September 1981 that the Americans -- or the American Government, I should say, claimed that they had the smoking gun. And this was the mycotoxin allegation.

REHM: And this was Alexander Haig who made this announcement.

EVANS: That's right. He made the announcement while in Bonn for arms negotiations. And it turned out to be a leaf in a twig at the time.

Now, mycotoxins, although the word sounds horrible, something like that sounds devious to non-scientists, mycotoxins are not a known chemical weapon. And really, part of the dispute since then has been: Are these things a chemical weapon at all? So that when they claim that they are a chemical weapon, they have provided no proof whatsoever that the Russians are in fact making them as a weapon, or even how to make them as a weapon, or even how lethal they are. Because as far as my reading of the chemistry [unintelligible] mycotoxins aren't a very potent poison, compared with nerve gases, for instance, which are incredibly lethal.

REHM: What has been the evidence that accusers have pointed to suggesting that in fact these weapons are being used?

EVANS: The evidence they've pointed to is mycotoxins in some leaf, some natural foliage samples, and also in blood and urine samples.

Now, there have been a number of arguments around this. It always struck me, as a social scientist, to come back to that, it seems to me that the sciences have basic rules of proof. And whether you're a physical scientist or a social scientist, you can apply basically the same rules. So it struck me when the Americans first made the mycotoxin allegation, they said, "These things don't occur naturally in the region." The first allegation. Well, it took me, as a social scientist, about three hours in the library to work out that wasn't true. And the government then backed off from that statement. They started to say, "Well, a combination of chemicals," and so on, "that are not indigenous to the region."

Now, it seems to me that if you're going to make claims about what is common or what is uncommon, you need a base line on which to say what is common. In other words, you need a body of research you can point to which says that this is what's natural, this is what's unnatural. They can't do that. There's very

little research being done into mycotoxins in Southeast Asia, very little research into mycotoxins almost anywhere in the Third World, as far as I can tell. Consequently, to make definite statements -- which is what the American Government has got itself into, is making definite statements that these things do or don't occur, definite statements about this being hard proof.

Now, as the debate has developed since then -- and the debate has largely revolved around is it a naturally-occurring -- is this a naturally-occurring phenomenon or is it not? And it seems to me that the case for the naturally-occurring people is strengthening with each passing day. Because the longer time goes on, the more time they have to do research and the more research they do, the more they find that these toxins actually occur naturally in the region.

Now, the latest theory along these lines, of course, is that put forward by Professor Matthew Meselson and his colleagues about the major component of all yellow rain samples handed in is in fact pollen. Now, some of these samples -- or bee feces. And some of these samples have been found to contain mycotoxins.

Now, the argument is now that these pollen actually provide a fertile basis on which these toxins could form, grow and feed off natural pollen.

So that as research progresses in this direction, more and more evidence points to the fact that these mycotoxins, both on the natural foliage and that's cropped up in the urine and blood samples, comes from natural phenomenon. Because mycotoxins or various forms of mycotoxins -- aflatoxin, for instance -- are a very common source of food poisoning in the Third World.

Now, the point, I guess, about all of this is that the American Government is making statements along the lines that this is conclusive evidence. Why I understand conclusive is that it's watertight. Now, it seems to me that, at the very best, their case is simply a hypothesis. I mean if they were standing up and saying, "Well, this looks odd to us. Let's do some research. Let's work it out." But they're not saying that. They're getting up, on the basis of very slim evidence, and saying, "This is definite evidence."

REHM: It seems remarkable to me that within the scientific community there is, frankly, this much difference of opinion over what would, to the lay person, seem to be a clearly settleable argument -- that is, scientifically -- with the use of some kinds of chemicals, microscopes, that sort of thing, to determine precisely what this substance actually is.

Matthew Meselson of Harvard is highly regarded within

his own community. And yet there are those who argue about him that he has been too wed to the idea of stopping any reintroduction of chemicals into the American weaponry, and therefore has come up with this theory about bee feces.

EVANS: Right. I mean they may be able to say that about Meselson if they want to just sort of tag one guy. But they haven't been able to convince, you know, leading scientific journals around the world: Nature, Science magazine here in America, and so on. It would seem to me that if it was simply the idiosyncracies of one man, then you wouldn't find the scientific community elsewhere also being very skeptical. Nature magazine saying earlier this year, at the very best, the State Department should say all its evidence is pretty shaky up to this point. Let's start again. And Science magazine, in August, discussing the toxin outbreak in Arizona here in America, indicating that, look, this really shows that the State Department's been too hasty about its allegations of the natural occurrence, or not, of these toxins in Southeast Asia.

The Australian Government, interestingly enough, is now -- its Defense Department did research on some yellow rain samples it was given last year. And the initial report concluded that these were fakes. Now, it transpires now that they thought that they were fakes because they could work out why anybody would hand pollen into them. And subsequently they are now thinking along the same lines that Professor Meselson has put forward. So that the Defense Department in Australia is not so skeptical of Matthew Meselson's idea. They're thinking, "Well, okay. This seems like a fruitful line of inquiry."

REHM: I want to make clear to our listeners that you have been primarily concerned with the issue of yellow rain as it may be evidenced precisely in Southeast Asia and have not been concerned with that question in Afghanistan.

EVANS: That's right. But the reason why a social scientist gets caught up into all this, given that we're looking at the dispute between scientists -- and here I am, I'm standing outside of it, as a sociologist, watching all this arguing going on. And it seemed to me each time the American Government's case was challenged, it would say, "Ah, but look at the refugee evidence. Ah, but look at all this other evidence."

REHM: Yes, exactly.

EVANS: And that's where I came in. I thought, well, okay. I can relate to that. I actually know about that area. I know about Laos, which is where the charges began. I know about Kampuchea. I know about the peoples there. And consequently I may be able to sit down and make a contribution to the debate.

So, what I've done, or what I've attempted to do in the book is look at the background to the dispute in Laos by pre-'75 and after the Communists took over at the end of '75, look at the refugee evidence, and build a number of, if you like, a number of explanations as to where the yellow rain stories began.

REHM: Give me an idea of what the refugees were said to be experiencing themselves in terms of reactions to this chemical substance, natural substance, whatever you choose to call it.

EVANS: Well, there is no single pattern. It seems to me that people were describing a range of -- if we look at the stories gathered by the American Government, often people were describing a plane flying over, a substance dropping out, people getting sick, and sometimes dying. That's, I guess, the story at its most simple. [Unintelligible] coherent, perhaps.

Now, the thing that I decided to do with the actual evidence gathered by the American Government is to say, "Well, the key thing is the details." These are people -- this is not a particularly uncommon story. People have known, you know, had herbicides, they've had all sorts of things dropped on them for years. And in fact, one large section of the book is concerned with documenting yellow rain stories from 1962 onwards, where stories are spread through villages about poisoning and so on when there was in fact a village epidemic. You know, this has been people who were surrounded by herbicides being dropped, but in fact they hadn't been dropped in their area, would still attribute problems in South Vietnam to these things. So it's not an uncommon story.

But often -- what I did was try to match the details. And I found -- it seems to me that it's a really simple procedure that one -- if you're going to believe stories -- and people have done studies into eyewitness testimony and people who have done work with refugee evidence and so on -- you have to look at who's telling the story, why they're telling the story before you can believe them. I mean people have all sorts of reasons for telling stories.

REHM: When did you go in, and exactly where did you go?

EVANS: I went and did work along the Thai-Kampuchean border -- the Thai-Lao border, interviewing refugees there. We're dealing mainly with the Hmong hill tribes people. Maybe that should be explained. The Hmong hill tribes people are one ethnic group in Laos, and Laos is an ethnically extremely diverse country. There are something like 68 different ethnic groups there.

This particular tribal group of people were split since

the mid-1930s, really, between a pro -- well, it evolved by the late '40s into a pro-Communist faction and a pro-French faction at that time. The pro-French faction then joined up with what was a CIA-backed secret army in Laos for some time. So that group is not a homogenous group. There's a political history to the Hmong, but we find people talking about the Hmong in a very general way when, in fact, you know, like most other populations, they tend to be divided into factions and whatever else.

Now, I interviewed Hmong associated with the secret army who run [unintelligible] a key camp, refugee camp, sort of decamp, if you like, to Thailand after '75. And that camp is run by the remnants of that secret army. And I talked to Hmong inside last summer who were ex-members of that secret army who are now living there quite peacefully, and Communist officials who are Hmong, and so on. So I did interviews on both sides of the border.

Now, what comes out of this, what came out of it for me was that the former members of the secret army were telling, you know, sort of what struck me as a much more militarily-oriented story than, say, ordinary Hmong people. Now, that's one problem. Why do people -- if you talk to ordinary Hmong, they seem to be attributing ordinary everyday illnesses to yellow rain.

So you talk to -- one woman I interviewed, she traveled out through these areas which are supposed to be being drenched with chemical weapons, fighting, God knows what else. She had a fairly quiet sort of trip out, actually, except that she got diarrhea at one point. And there was no planes and no substance, even. And her son who was traveling with her said he knew yellow rain was around because he'd put his shirt out one day, and when he gathered it in it had yellow spots on it. Now, maybe that's the pollen that Matthew Meselson is talking about actually on his shirt. That's only occurred to me since I've heard the story.

But I asked her, well, how did she know it was yellow rain? And she said, well, people told her that this must be the yellow rain that they've heard about.

Now, how do people get to hear about yellow rain?

REHM: Well, to what extent did the U.S. Government do its own kinds of interviews, Grant?

EVANS: Well, I looked at what they did. This was the important thing. I looked at what they gathered. And that's where I applied this idea of trying to match up the stories. None of them checked out, not a single one. I was really, to be quite honest, staggered by that, where you can't get two people to tell the same story about the same event. So that one -- and

they seemed to be mainly soldiers, ex-CIA-secret-army soldiers that they interviewed.

So what you would have was one guy talking -- where one could match up an incident, what seemed to be the same incident, you have one guy saying a plane flew over and fired rockets, and all the vegetation died; and another guy saying a helicopter flew over and sprayed the substance, whatever it was, blue, green. You know, the range of colors is quite extensive at that point in time. And just chickens died and a few people got sick. Quite significant discrepancies.

REHM: I should say.

EVANS: And it seemed to me, okay, there still may be a basis there for doing a lot more research. But it's certainly not a basis on which to make definite statements.

REHM: Grant Evans is with me this morning. He is a sociologist who has written a book, and the book has on it a huge question mark and asks the question, "Are chemical weapons being used in Southeast Asia?" The book is called "The Yellow Rain-makers."

We are going to open the phones in just a few moments and take your calls on 966-8850, as we discuss further this whole question of chemical weapons and to what extent they may actually be being used today, if at all.

The whole question is a very important one today, in terms of the U.S. position vis-a-vis the Soviet Union, not only in regard to chemical weapons per se, but that larger issue of disarmament.

EVANS: Yes, it is. I think -- I guess that's one of the other things that prompted me to write the book. Had the charges not been as definite as they were and had the poliltical environment and the new cold war, it's being called, had that not come about, I guess, in many ways, yellow rain -- this is a cold war story, I think, in the end.

And I think it is -- why I think it is very important, it's being used as an example of how one can't trust the Soviets to come to an agreement about anything. Because this particular allegation does jeopardize, in a sense, the two really important agreements the major powers have come to. One is the 1925 Geneva Convention on Chemical Weapons, the outlawing of chemical weapons use in war. And the other one is a biological and toxin weapons agreement that the Soviets and the Americans came to in 1972. They signed it in '72, ratified it in 1976. And it's a very important agreement, that one, because actually agreed to get rid

of the weapons. Very unusual because usually they say, "Well, I'll have 20 and you can have 19," and something like that. In this case, they actually decided to get rid of them.

And it seems to me that's an important agreement. And the toxin allegation, the mycotoxin allegation challenges that agreement. I mean it's -- I guess I've tried not to get too paranoid in this book and tried to write it as rationally as possible. But when you think, why make a toxin allegation, and it seems to be such a shaky one, when it does seem to be directed at the heart of this most recent agreement. Because there are members -- there are people in the American Government up on the Hill there who say you can't come to any agreement with the Soviets. And here's your -- here's an example of not being able to come to agreements, because what we signed -- we ratified it in '76. No sooner had we ratified it, they now are breaking it. This is what the argument is. And therefore we shouldn't come to agreements with them about nuclear weapons either. The only language these people know is strength, and therefore we need to build up chemical weapons, nuclear weapons, and so on.

REHM: Well, what about he natives to whom you talk? Are they deliberately lying as they talk about gassing attacks or as they talk about their own physical experience?

EVANS: Well, I don't think they are. I think -- well, again I'd make a distinction. I think that there is -- there's the secret-army Hmong, if you like. There are the ordinary Hmong. And then there are the Communist Hmong inside Laos. And you can get a yellow rain story from every one of them.

Now, it seems to me that what people are doing -- and this is where I tried to provide a broader explanation within the book, which utilizes my skills as a sociologist-cum-anthropologist. And that is going through how people understand illness. I gave the example of the woman getting diarrhea before.

When people are in a situation where they -- the germ theory is not understood in Southeast Asia or amongst -- I mean that's something that we didn't have until a few -- what, a hundred years ago for most of the population, I suppose. Disease and so on is caused by sorcery, spirits, bad places, whatever.

Now, if you float into that environment a story about yellow rain and people listen to it on Voice of America inside Laos, which in fact they do, Radio Free Asia, it travels along a rumor network, people get sick, they speculate, "Ah, is this the yellow rain we've heard about?" Then you've set up an environment in which people are prepared to speculate in much the same way as we speculate about the causes of cancer in a

scientific environment. And we're talking here about a pre-scientific environment. They speculate about illnesses in this way.

And I think this is what explains, certainly to me, why you can talk to a Communist Hmong inside Laos -- I mean I almost fell over when I got my first story from a Communist Hmong about yellow rain. He didn't explain -- there were no planes involved, nothing, but just said that these people were getting sick from the yellow rain.

And other researchers who have gone into Laos since then -- Jackie Shanion (?) and Roger Rount (?) -- have found similar things where people are now pointing to what appears to be pollen on the ground and saying this -- it's got no combat situation, no planes, no nothing. But they're attributing problems that they have -- and Laos is a very unhealthy place, which is another point I make in the book -- problems that they have like that to this phenomenon that they have heard about.

Now, these refugee camps are in a similar situation. Even more so, in many ways, because what you've got is people sitting around in a camp all day. They don't have to go out and dig the field, which people inside Laos have to do. In other words, they've got nothing else to do but sit around and listen to these stories, or tell them all day.

And secondly, Western journalists are trooping through there in droves saying, "Give me a yellow rain story." And they get them.

So that it's sort of -- and it feeds back in via newspaper, via aid workers, and so on.

REHM: How were you received, personally?

EVANS: In the camp?

REHM: Yes.

EVANS: Well, I think they received me initially as yet another journalist, as it were, you know, come in to get his yellor rain story. And so that they produced one guy who's an old lieutenant in the -- first fighting for the French, then fighting with the CIA secret army. They introduced him proudly, saying he's been introduced 13 times, you know, by the U.N., by Australian TV, American TV. His testimony's been reproduced numerous times. So what you have is, in a sense, a star witness from this crowd for the story.

It was interesting because one of the things I was able

to do with that guy was check his story back over a couple of years, because he had told a different story to people each time. So he'd modified it. And he'd modified it, in part, according to what had been going on in the press.

REHM: How did the story change as it evolved?

EVANS: Well, it changed both in terms of who was killed, how they were killed, what happened in the aftermath of the attack, in the type of -- the alleged equipment that was used.

There were stories that had circulated in the press here about the Hmong using primitive gas masks of opium. And his latest stories talk about using that, where his early stories don't talk about it at all.

The other most recent interesting example I've had of the press feedback into the camps and the refugees regurgitating a story back is, in fact, around the bee theory. And, of course, the world only knew about the bee theory, as it were, the bee feces theory in June-July of this year.

REHM: Of this year.

EVANS: Now, in July of this year, some people interviewing Hmong in Ban Van Nai (?) camp in Thailand, these refugees, these secret-army characters, one Hmong said in the middle of 1982 there'd been a yellow rain attack on their village. And they had called in the Pathet Lao, and the Pathet Lao said, "Oh, no. This is not yellow rain. This is bee feces."

So, the interesting thing I found about that was the Pathet Lao allegedly knew about the bee feces theory one year before anybody else in the world did. But what it strikes me as is simply this almost -- I was staggered. Within one month, the story had fed into what I call a rumor network and is feeding back out.

REHM: As you listened to all these stories, then, and realized the discrepancies, as well as some of the consistencies, do you conclude that absolutely no chemicals are being used in Southeast Asia?

EVANS: I would be prepared to say that I don't think they've been used since 1978. Because one of the things that we haven't touched on is, okay, why would anybody use chemical weapons? I mean it seems to me that if you -- you'd use them because you've got a military problem.

Now, one of the things I've done in the book is try to

work out, well, how much fighting was going on in Laos. Now, as far as I can work out, the last -- what there was left of this secret army, the last major engagement between them and the Communists was in late 1977. Since then, you've had, you know, sort of small bandit groups, as it were, inside Laos, going across the Mekong, taking a potshot at a bus, or whatever, but nothing of the order of, say, the opium warlords in Northern Thailand at the moment with their armies, or the Keren (?) State army in Burma, or the Shan State armies in Burma. Large parts of Burma are simply off limits to the [unintelligible] government. That situation doesn't pertain in Laos.

So that there is no military rationale that I can deduce after that period for using outlawed, internationally outlawed chemical weapons. I mean you can do a lot of things to people before you start getting condemned, like dropping napalm on them and so forth. But I can't find a good military rationale. And yet most of the yellow rain stories have been collected since then.

Now, there was one story that I came across, a third-hand story which was told by one of these secret-army guys to the Thai police, who then told it to reporters. So it's a dubious chain.

REHM: Yes.

EVANS: But it's the one genuine-looking story to me, anyway. Back in 1977, a story of Pathet Lao firing gas cannisters into a cave. Now, why did that strike me as authentic? It struck me as authentic because this is what the U.S. Government, or U.S. armed forces had done in Vietnam to flush Viet Cong out of caves. They'd use tear gases.

Now, that's a very different kettle of fish to what we're talking about in terms...

REHM: Oh, yes. I should say.

EVANS: So it seems to me that it's plausible that tear gas may have been used at that time. There's no evidence for herbicides. And, in fact, there's no evidence for tear gas, either.

So, really, there's no hard evidence for the use of chemical weapons. I wouldn't say absolutely it's not been used. But it seems to me highly unlikely that it's been used since that time. And I can't see any good reason for it being used. I mean to take the most cynical perspective, if one wanted to -- if there was a military problem and you were going to break major international agreements, why not hit them with nerve gas? But

we've got no physical evidence for any of this. So that -- and my contribution, I think, is to provide an explanation of how a rumor gets off the ground and why you get -- really, there are a lot of very loony stories that come out of Southeast Asia too which are all connected with yellow rain.

REHM: Let's go to the phones at this point. 966-8850 is the number to call between now and 11:00, if you'd like to join us. Sociologist Grant Evans is with me this morning. We're talking about the use of chemical weapons and, in fact, whether they are being used in Southeast Asia. Mr. Evans has written a book called "Yellow Rainmakers."

...Good morning. You're on the air.

MAN: ...I have taked to Diane just before on this subject. And the question is, the State Department is sort of pushing this view that you're talking about, but the Defense Department is saying that Agent Orange is not the cause of the trouble for our veterans. Now, I'm just wondering if this difference within our own government isn't causing everybody to have doubts, you know, one side or the other. It's very hard to take a position. And I was wondering what you thought about it from that standpoint.

EVANS: As I understand you, you're saying there are differences of opinion in the government because of the dispute over Agent Orange.

MAN: Yes. As I understand it from Diane's program, the Defense Department will not send a representative. However, in other places, of course, their position is that Agent Orange does not cause the trouble to the Vietnam veteran. And, of course, the State Department is saying in Southeast Asia and in Afghanistan, you know, chemical agents are being used.

So I was just wondering what you thought.

EVANS: Well, I guess I have a number of thoughts on this. It seems to me that if -- it seems to me, firstly, the yellow rain allegations have partly obscured America's own use of chemical weapons in Southeast Asia. I think, in a sense, it has thrown a smokescreen across it.

And one of the things I was interesting in in looking at -- well, in my investigations around yellow rain was that the American Government seems to have never seriously considered that what was being described was in fact tear gas or herbicides. Now, why didn't they consider that? It seems to me because they can't realistically start accusing, say, the Vietnamese or the Lao or the Soviets of using these weapons when they've used them

themselves.

So, there was a logic of escalation built into their charges from the very beginning. They had to say it was worse than what the American Government had done.

Secondly, I would say that in relation to the allegations around Agent Orange and dioxin, that had the same standard of evidence which is being demanded from the veterans, had that same standard of evidence been demanded from people putting forward allegations about yellow rain been demanded, then the yellow rain allegation would never have got off the ground.

The Minister of Defense Support in Australia launched my book there, and he said almost exactly the same thing, because the Australian Government is now launching an inquiry into the effects of dioxin on Australian veterans. And his opinion was -- in the actual launching of the book -- was that the yellow rain allegations simply wouldn't have got off the ground had they --had there not been this double standard, if you like.

REHM: I hope that answers your question, sir.

MAN: Yes. Thank you very much.

REHM: You're on the air.

MAN: ...The report has been from several people in Southeast Asia that there is yellow rain that's being dropped there. And I think the gentleman said that the United States officials have claimed that there is yellow rain being dropped in Southeast Asia, but he can't seem to find any evidence of it.

So, what do you think the real story is here, then?

EVANS: Well, I think the real story -- the real story is a very complicated story. But I think the story was picked up at a particular point in time -- namely, late 1978 -- as regional tension in Southeast Asia came to the boil. There were horror stories flooding, and real horror stories, flooding out of Kampuchea. And then there was the invasion of Vietnam by China, and so on. That, in a sense, launched the yellow rain stories as one atrocity story among, you know, many others at that time.

But then it was snapped up into what appears to me to be the new cold war onslaught on the Soviet Union, where any story can be told about the Soviet Union. And it does disturb me that in this new environment -- and it really began, I guess, around about 1979-80 -- allegations, and quite unsubstantiated allegations, about Soviet misconduct, I think it was called, with America putting itself in the role of the world's schoolmaster. And those sorts of allegations were made. And it seems to me it

suited groups here in America pushing that, and also the chemical weapons establishment here in America, because there's been a moratorium on the building of chemical weapons here in America since 1970. It seems that they are poised to recommence chemical weapons production.

So that there are strong interests here in America who would see this story as a good one to push.

MAN: ...Are you suggesting, then, that all of this is -- are just stories, just storytelling and that there really is no yellow rain being airdropped on...

EVANS: Yes, I am suggesting that. Yes.

MAN: Okay.

REHM: You know, in this country and elsewhere, taking a position like that can bring down on your head charges of Communist sympathizer and Pinko and all the rest of it.

EVANS: That's all right. I live in Australia.

REHM: Have you heard those kinds of charges?

EVANS: No, I haven't. I debated up in MIT with some people from the State Department position. But so far the discussion's been very -- well, I've been surprised. It's been rational and clear, even though I think I'm out in front.

REHM: But by implication, Grant, what you're doing is suggesting that the State Department is continuing to further this idea because of its own belief or because of its own desire to thwart the talks, the disarmament talks with the Soviet Union.

EVANS: I think that's partly true. But I also think that they've boxed themselves into an impossible position. This is what is really quite disturbing about the allegations, is that the government has made and some congressmen have made definite charges which they can't prove and which they can't back away from. And so that you're in a situation where they have to insist that they are right right up to the end.

I mean one can discuss this question quite rationally with the Canadian Government or the Australian Government or the British Government. But the American Government has gone out on a limb and said, "We have conclusive evidence." Now, once you put yourself in that position, then you can't back away from it.

REHM: You're on the air.

WOMAN: I wanted you to comment on the American press role in this and whether you think that it's -- is it a question of their laxity, that they just really don't want to work hard enough to arrive at the truth?

I was in France recently and saw a documentary on this which I thought was much more evenhanded. And I started talking to the people I was with about the fact that in America we have a free press, supposedly, but we see nothing like this on American television. And I don't understand why not. How is the American press failing us so badly?

EVANS: Well, I must admit I became very suprised, as I was surveying this story, to find what was reported in the American press. And, for instance, there are stories, yellow rain stories about green eggs being dropped out of the sky and lying on the ground and the outside peeling off and noxious coming out, absolutely improbable stories, but reported with the most incredible straight face in the American press. Now, I could never understand how a journalist could write it with a straight face, but moreover I couldn't understand how an editor would let it get through.

REHM: Well, have you ever talked to any of the journalists who've reported such stories?

EVANS: The thing that struck me about a number of the journalists who have actually written yellow rain stories is that they wrote them directly out of State Department documents. There are a number of journalists...

REHM: And not firsthand experience.

EVANS: That's right. A number of journalists that I spoke to had never been to the camps, even.

Now, it seems to me that there is an interesting situation in Southeast Asia, whereas one of the things that happened during the Vietnam War, journalists became increasingly wary of State Department and government handouts. They'd been told too many lies, and so they started to do very, very good research and basic hustling, going out on the ground, looking and seeing what's happening. This has, somehow, all stopped since '75. People are -- you know, State Department briefings on Southeast Asia have become respectable once again. All the good journalists seem to have migrated to Central America, or something like that. But the reporting on Southeast Asia is really quite appalling, I think. And I don't understand quite why this is so, but I've been really -- I've had to read so much newspaper reporting on this, and so much of it is just sloppy. You know, people haven't done hard research and haven't done hard thinking about it.

REHM: But how is it reported in Australia, for instance?

EVANS: It's reported -- well, for instance, I get -- I can write about it in the newspaper there. But the general [unintelligible] gets much better reporting in Australia. Just before I left, there was a documentary on Vietnam and Kampuchea on the ABC, which is the Australian Broadcasting Commission, which was, in many ways, surprisingly sympathetic to Vietnam, actually, you know. I mean very -- I couldn't imagine ever seeing on American television. At the moment, anyway.

So I think the reporting on Asia, generally, is much better there. But that's because, I think, we are more aware of the fact -- more and more aware of the fact that we are, in fact, a Southeast Asian nation, I suppose.

REHM: I wonder whether -- I'm looking at the telephones here and realizing that we've had very few callers. I'm wondering whether it is an argument that the general population sees is among the scientists themselves, and of little interest, and perhaps, even going beyond that, of little importance to them in their daily lives.

EVANS: Well, I would say that that's probably true. It seems to me that what this story has done, and certainly the way I've seen it reported and the television shows that I've seen done, or some clips I've seen of it, it's simply added to, if you like, the cowboy [unintelligible], which is you get one more horror story which feeds in from a remote place. I mean who knows about Laos? Who knows about Cambodia?

REHM: Yeah. Yeah, exactly.

EVANS: Who knows about Afghanistan?

Here's just one more example of nasty things happening in faraway places. It feeds into a...

REHM: That I can't do anything about. And if those scientists are going to fight their way through about bee feces or not, I mean why should I be interested in that?

EVANS: Right. Right. And so it really is an argument amongst governments.

But it has been used. You'll find that President Reagan, when he is making speeches about nuclear arms deals, he will refer to yellow rain in the midst of these other things. You know, Soviet violations of this, that and the other thing, and yellow rain tagged there in there in speech after speech.

And this is being used as the thin edge of the wedge at that level of discussion.

So that while I'm sure for most people the whole arms negotiation is absolutely baffling and is a perfect example of the use and abuse of statistics -- you know, people quote this, that and the other thing. And really, to keep up with any of it, you almost need to work at it full-time. [Unintelligible] sort of basic, what, gut responses to it. You know, freeze the things or we don't need any more of that, whatever. But with chemical weapons it gets one level more complicated.

REHM: You're on the air.

WOMAN: I'm going to risk sounding very ignorant, but I've read just a little bit, admittedly very little bit, about this issue. But what I have read and what I've heard recently has confirmed -- has arounded some doubts and fears in my mind. And that is that President Reagan is going to at least regenerate some of the research into chemical warfare and will become involved in this.

Now, what I have remembered reading is some journalists have interviewed people who have escaped from these areas where these little eggs have been dropped, and they've had burns and things like this.

My question to the speaker is, has he talked with those journalists who have interviewed the people firsthand?

EVANS: I've talked with some of the journalists, but they have generally -- have got a brief, more or less. You know, "We need a yellow rain story." They breeze in.

For instance, an Australian journalist who did a story for a television program about a year and a half ago -- it was pretty much a copy of an American program here. It's even called after 60 -- it's called 60 Minutes, actually. I think they stole the whole thing from here. And they were in the camp for, you know, probably half a day, and they know nothing about the region. They were simply there to get the story.

So I've spoken to those guys. They really have no way of evaluating what they're told. They don't know very much about the people that they have spoken to.

For instance, in that particular television program they had guys pointing to lesions on their arms and saying, "This was caused by yellow rain." Now, this has occurred time and time again, where photos have been taken of Hmong with lesions on their arm, which on investigation turn out to be either a fungal

infection or to be a scabies or something like that. Which simply strengthens my argument that people are attributing common ailments of the region to yellow rain.

WOMAN: So none of this has been supported. What these journalists have in fact seen with their eyes has not been supported by physicians, either in the area or physicians that have been brought in that would be objective.

EVANS: That's right. And what you're seeing with your own eyes, as you put it, the eyewitness report, it depends on how you see. People will see what they like to see.

REHM: And who you're talking to.

WOMAN: Okay.

REHM: Good morning.

WOMAN: I'd like your guest to expand on his statement that he doesn't really believe anything like this has gone on since 1978. What does he think happened prior to 1978?

EVANS: I was suggesting that I thought -- one of the reasons why I made that division was because it seems to me that if people are going to use lethal chemical weapons, you need a good military rationale for doing it. Now, why I made that division was that it seemed to me that there was at least some military rationale for doing it up to 1978. I don't think there was a good military rationale. But if one's going to try to make a strong case, one would say, well, at least up till then you had maybe some reason for using it.

WOMAN: But do you have any evidence that they did use it?

EVANS: Pardon?

WOMAN: But do you have any evidence that they did indeed use it?

EVANS: No.

WOMAN: No. That's the point I wasn't sure on.

EVANS: Sure. Sure. Sorry. Yeah.

WOMAN: Diane mentioned that she thought people weren't interested. I've always been very interested in it. And I use to work in the government myself, and I had talked to some people who still work and were in a position to evaluate all this

information and who had no -- they're not on the top level where they need to tout a certain line for the Defense Department or the State Department, or anything. And I said, "Do you really think that this has happened in Laos?" And they said, "Yes, we do think so. We do think the evidence supports it." And, in fact, they will be the first people to take the position you do if they thought the evidence had been fabricated or pushed.

And so, I don't know, but I'm only mentioning that people whose views and analytical ability I respect who saw --were in a position to see all the data do think that it happened.

EVANS: Sure. You know, I have good friends of mine in Australia who have not been through all the information. They're really totally dependent on me to sift it all, which is really why people write books, I suppose, is to sit down and look at all the data, because it does take a lot of work to get on top of it and...

REHM: You can form opinions without necessarily having all the necessary data you need.

EVANS: That's right.

REHM: Thanks for calling.

You're on the air.

WOMAN: Your comment on your no phone calls and is it of interest to people. I think this kind of reporting is important. I think the cold war escalation has got people hysterical. We don't get news the way I hear they do in Europe and other places. And I'm glad to hear this. I'm frightening, the things that are coming out.

REHM: Yeah. I understand what you're saying and I appreciate your comment on that.

You're on the air.

WOMAN: I just wanted to call and give a point of view from a news reporter who was in South Asia, not Southeast Asia, reporting yellow rain stories, which is...

EVANS: This is from Afghanistan. Yes?

WOMAN: Yes, in Afghanistan. And I just wanted to make a comment on -- this was until 1981. I left South Asia to come back to the States at that time. And I wanted to just say one thing about how the State Department handled reports on yellow rain at that time coming out of Afghanistan. And I want to

emphasize that was not reporting on Indochina at all, and I really know very little about the situation with chemical weapons there.

But the reports that I filed were based on interviews with tens or dozens of refugees who had come from various parts of Afghanistan. They were extremely simple people who couldn't tell you what province they came from. They could give you their tribal name and their village name, and that was just about all that they were equipped to talk about in terms of -- in talking about political locations. And they gave remarkably similar descriptions of things that happened to them and to other people as they were moving from Afghanistan into Pakistan.

And I never once reported a word from any State Department document. And furthermore, the State Department -- I was told this by an American official shortly after one of my stories was filed. This was from the border area in Pakistan --that a State Department official based in Pakistan at the time had actually written a note to the State Department saying to watch for the story, and emphasized the fact that he had been --I had written this story against his cautions that he was not sure that these were believable. And I decided to overrule his opinion 'cause he hadn't been out talking to these people, and I had been.

REHM: Can you tell me which publication you were writing for?

WOMAN: I was working for UPI.

REHM: Uh-huh. I see.

Grant, you want to comment?

EVANS: Well, I don't know -- we're expressing mutual ignorance about specific areas here. I don't know a lot about the Afghani stories, except that it seems to me that there's an incredible diversity of them. I've come across stories which have been reported in the press of big plastic balls bouncing across moutains and exploding on people with gas, and so on.

But from reporters and one book called "A Higher Form of Killing," a recent book by two British journalists on chemical weapons, they said that when they went to Afghanistan and they interviewed people, that they found the place sort of, in a sense, so politically supercharged, with various people walking around and asking refugees for their stories, that, in a sense, a very similar situation seemed to have occurred there to what has occurred in Southeast Asia, where it is a story told by hill tribesmen about this, you know, gas warfare which is told in a

very sort of general way, as far as I can tell.

But again, I can't comment because I haven't been there. I would have liked to have done some research on Afghanistan, but -- and I really think it would probably be a good thing if somebody did do a good job on it.

REHM: I appreciate your sharing your experiences with us this morning.

WOMAN: Okay. Well, thank you.

REHM: You're on the air.

MAN: I'd like to say that as far as motive goes, why not just simply experimentation? I mean after all, our government experimented on our own people in subways as far as, I think, viruses or bacteria is concerned, some years ago. And...

EVANS: It wasn't...

MAN: ...Russians experimented on their own people.

REHM: Do you want to comment on that, Grant?

EVANS: That experiment which took place in the subway of New York was, as I recall, they didn't use anythink lethal. They just sort of used a substance, but they were experimenting to see what would happen if somebody decided to drop something in the subway of New York. So that it wasn't experimentation in that sense.

I agree -- it seems to me that various regimes and governments have experimented on people in nasty ways at time. But it seems to me the experimentation argument with these weapons is not a good one, because it seems to me that all major military establishments who like to combat-test their weapons and experiment with them, it depends on what the political cost is. We've got a very high stockpile...

MAN: ...they aren't answerable to anybody. I mean, you know, they're not answerable to Congress or -- don't get me wrong. I'm not a...

EVANS: Sure. No, no. I understand.

MAN: I mean we are dealing with a closed society, and they can pretty much do as they please.

EVANS: Well, it would seem to me that if you were going to experiment, you know, I would imagine that it would be far

better to drop this stuff on a Siberian labor camp than in a place where people are going to stream out and tell the story.

REHM: Thanks so much for your call, sir.

Would you enlighten me as to why you believe the Wall Street Journal has been so insistent in trying to persuade its readers to accept the Administration's point of view on this?

EVANS: I really have no idea. The stridency of it. But again, I think they've stuck their neck out and it's a bit hard for them to back off. And what they've done is leap on any bit of evidence that backs their case, and attack anybody who challenges it. They have set up a fairly irrational level of discussion whereby people, like myself, who try to say, "Okay. Let's look at this carefully" get attacked. Matthew Meselson has been attacked by them in a fairly sort of -- I mean a form of journalism which really mirrors the people that they claim to be attacking [unintelligible]. It's people who question the dominant Soviet view too.

REHM: Let's take this one last caller.

WOMAN: I was listening to Mr. Evans talking about journalists. I'm a journalist myself, although I'm not an American. But I mean there is a sort of a national interest, I think, that many journalists and many newspapers take, particularly on subjects like yellow rain, on the Soviet Union, in a sense. There's a great lack of criticism of anything that is sort of policy until the policy starts coming apart.

You know, there isn't really any good reporting at the moment showing the real story that's going on in Lebanon. And there's a lot of disputed material coming out trying to fox people. But it's a pattern that I've watched for seven years. And people take an opportunity to cash in on policy too. I know a journalist who was studying and finishing a thesis and decided to change this thesis to yellow rain because she knew it would get better acceptance.

It's quite interesting that everything has a sort of a nationalistic attitude to it.

EVANS: So careers are on the line on this sort of thing.

WOMAN: Well, I think people don't want to upset administrations. In this city here, people rely enormously on leaks, on giving -- you're giving information. And virtually, if you look at it, you see that foreign policy is managed through leaks, in many ways. Because journalists feel -- you know,

journalism here is so tough and rough to get input for a start.

REHM: And I want to give Grant just a moment to respond. Thanks so much for your call.

EVANS: Yes. Well, I really don't know the Washington scene. But I do -- you know, it seems to me everywhere there's this patron-client relationship between politicians and journalists. And I think you're probably right that journalists aren't prepared to cross the line and challenge their patrons, if you like, on key questions.

REHM: Well, I hope that a great deal more is going to be done in the way of research on this subject because it is one that is more, far more than simply intriguing. It is one that is of importance to all of us.

Grant Evans, thank you so much for being here this morning.

His book is called, simply, "The Yellow Rainmakers: Are Chemical Weapons Being Used in Southeast Asia?" Mr. Evans will be appearing at the Institute for Policy Studies on the 24th of October. For further information about that appearance, you can call 547-0123.